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## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

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Property Address: **501 T Street NW**  
Landmark/District: **LeDroit Park Historic District**

Meeting Date: **July 26, 2012**  
H.P.A. Number: **12-499**  
Staff Reviewer: **Brendan Meyer**

☒ Agenda  
☐ Consent Calendar  
☐ Denial Calendar  
☒ Permit review  
☒ Alteration  
☐ New Construction  
☐ Demolition  
☐ Subdivision

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The applicant, James Killette acting as agent for owner Marcia Heminger, seeks permit review for the construction of a basement stair in the side yard of 501 T Street NW in the LeDroit Park Historic District. Plans were prepared by Killette and Associates.

### Property Description and Context



*Figure 1. 501 T Street NW*

The subject property is a free-standing Victorian corner house built in 1886 and designed by James G. Meyers. His best known work is the Heurich Mansion which he designed 5 years later. While this is not an original James H. McGill house, it shares several of the same characteristics. From 1873 to 1887, McGill was the architect of over 60 houses in the then new “romantic suburb” of LeDroit Park. McGill’s houses are handsome examples of romantic eclecticism,

exhibiting elements of Italian Villa, Gothic Revival, Queen Anne, Second Empire, and Italianate styles set on spacious landscaped lots affording front and side yards.

Like the McGill houses, 501 T Street is a compact arrangement of several components. The core plan, nearly square, is expanded by a front projection on T Street, an identically sized and detailed projection on 5<sup>th</sup> Street, a frame porch at the front entrance, and an intricate slate roof of intersecting gables, mansards, and cresting. Unlike McGill's villas which are rich with window hoods, brackets, dormers and cornices, 501 T Street is austere; nearly unadorned save for porch and soffit millwork and the brick stringcourse at the level of the first floor window sills.

What 501 T Street does share with the McGill houses is perhaps the most important feature in the historic character of LeDroit Park: *space*. The house is set back from the front and side property lines, creating a spacious front yard and narrow side yard. Whether or not the grounds around this first generation of houses in LeDroit Park remained open or became substantial gardens, the extent of space, and especially green space, around these homes is fundamental to their character, relation to the street, and setting.<sup>1</sup>

### **Proposal**

The existing side yard, measured from the front face of the house and back to the side projection at the rear of the house, is 17 feet long and 5 feet wide (See Figure 2). It is landscaped simply with grass and low plantings and is enclosed by a combination of wicket and chain link metal fences. This area is immediately adjacent to the public sidewalk along 5<sup>th</sup> Street. The basement is currently accessed at this location via a bulk-head door of some vintage, likely fifty years old and for maintenance purposes.

The applicant proposes to replace the non-original bulk-head door in the side yard with a full-height basement door and entrance stairs that would run straight along the side of the house. At almost 15 feet long and 4 feet wide, the stair well and its 1 foot wide strip of railings and plantings would take up and replace the entire existing side yard. At the time of this writing, no elevations or description of the required railing had been provided.

### **Evaluation and Recommendation**

Basement entrances that exist on LeDroit Park corner houses are infrequent and never this visible or adjacent to the public sidewalk. Of 46 corner houses found in LeDroit Park, 15 have basement entrances and most of these are original or indiscreetly located under the main front entrance or at the rear. Only two free standing corner houses, at 1883 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and 418 U Street, have side basement entrances. The former is of indeterminate date, but the latter was an approved alteration in 2007.

The comparison between the discreet and compatible alteration at 418 U Street and the proposal for 501 T Street starts with the geometric differences between the two houses. While both are corner houses with projections into front and side yards, 418 U has a front corner projection that steps back to a gabled side projection, which then steps farther back to the side wall of the house. The result is that the side yard expands the further you progress along the side of the house. The modern basement stairs are located at this widest part of the side yard, farthest from the front of the house and next to a pre-existing side entrance at the ground floor. The stairs only fill a portion of the side yard. They are

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<sup>1</sup> The open landscape concept in LeDroit Park was a critical aspect in recent HPA cases, including: 1922 3<sup>rd</sup> St NW (HPA #10-175) and 1859 3<sup>rd</sup> St NW (HPA #09-078).

screened from visibility from the front by the corner and side projections of the house, and are partially screened from side visibility by a ten foot buffer of lawn and low plantings.

The proposed stairs at 501 T Street do not enjoy the same advantages of projections and dimensions found at 418 U Street. At 501 T, the side projection is at the rear extremity of the side elevation, so the stairs are forced forward of the projection such that they would be unscreened and visible from the front of the house. Also the side yard is narrower than 418 U so there is no room for a landscaped buffer to sufficiently screen it from view along the side.

In 2011, the Board adopted design guidelines specific to the topic of new basement entrances. These guidelines summarize important historic characteristics that should be preserved in these kinds of alterations and what differentiates a compatible alteration from an incompatible one. In general, new basement entrances should be inconspicuous (1.1), should be subordinate to the setting of the house (3.1), and should not be close to the sidewalk (3.3). Although 418 U was altered before these guidelines were adopted, it is substantially in line with the guidelines while 501 T is not.<sup>2</sup> Most fundamentally, the proposed stairs would dominate the setting of the house by eliminating the side yard and being immediately adjacent to the sidewalk.

The subject property does however offer two locations more favorable for a basement entrance that could be sufficiently discreet and compatible. The rear elevation, already approved at the staff level for minor façade alterations, has a rear porch that could shelter a covered basement entrance. This entire area is already screened from view by a tall, mature privacy hedge. Another alternative, less preferable than the rear location, is under the front porch. This might offer sufficient space to accommodate a basement entrance without removing any character defining features of the porch and may be worthy of study.

## **Recommendation**

*The HPO recommends that the Board:*

- *Not approve the building permit application for a new basement stair and entrance in the side yard of 501 T Street NW on the finding that the design is incompatible with the character of the historic district and therefore not consistent with the purposes of the preservation act.*
- *Direct the applicant to select an alternative location for the basement stairs.*

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<sup>2</sup> *Preservation and Design Guidelines for Basement Entrances and Windows* (2011). Section numbers in the text refer to this guideline.





*Figure 2. Location of proposed stairs*